Besides the important role of infrastructure and Imperial residences, examined in the previous chapter, in determining the geographical distribution of villas, villa distribution must be considered also in relation to local communities, for villas and towns normally had a relationship of close economic and social symbiosis. In the geographic area examined in this study, large and well appointed villas, belonging either to the Roman elite or to local elites, tend to be concentrated in areas surrounding urban centers, highlighting the socioeconomic importance of these connections and reminding us to look beyond the oft-quoted relationship of villas to the metropolis of Rome. In modern studies devoted to Roman villas in Italy, by and large, the close social and economic relationships between villas and nearby communities have received too little attention. In fact, the emphasis has been put mostly on the relations between the countryside—or coastal areas—and Rome, the center of both power and economic consumption. In reality, when one looks at a large sample of villa sites and tries to reorient them in their topographical and economic context, the close relationships between villa sites and nearby urban centers, such as municipia and coloniae, is evident.

With respect to patterns in villa distribution relative to urban centers, it is possible to identify the following trend: the “villa phenomenon” is more intense in areas with denser colonization and a higher degree of urbanization. This phenomenon is certainly not exclusive of Italy and is observable also in other areas, such as North Africa. It is a trend easily detectable in Etruria. Coastal and insular villas aside, the mouth of the Ombrone River marks a dividing line in terms of the number

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1 The symbiosis between villas and local urban centres has been picked up and addressed by field survey works, but the studies that focus on villas and villa culture have mostly focused on the Roman senatorial elite and therefore on villas as the otium escape from the negotium of the Urbs and on the villa production oriented to the market of Rome.
and typology of villas present in the territory: for the area to the north, an area comparatively less densely urbanized, the number of known villas is much lower than for the area to the south.  

Therefore, within the framework outlined above about the importance of infrastructure and Imperial residences, two other elements seem also to determine villa distribution in an area. The first is proximity to Rome; the second is proximity to a local urban center. Southern Etruria, where many villas have been identified, presents both these elements, with a high concentration of municipia and coloniae. In northern Etruria, large and well appointed villas are concentrated in the areas around what few cities the region has (Rusellae, Populonium, Volterrae, Pisa, Luca, Florentia), in comparison with the region of southern Etruria. This is not to say that these areas lack signs of intensive land-use in the Roman period: centuriation of the land and small- and medium-sized farms are here well attested—think for instance of the so-called Piana delle Cento Fattorie near modern Lucca, where numerous farms assigned to coloni were built in the mid-second century B.C.—but large, well-appointed villas are not as common as in southern Etruria. Cambi and his colleagues proposed a typological classification for villas in Etruria that takes into account their relationship to urban centers and the distribution of their production. Although these scholars are focusing mostly on the situation in Etruria in the Late Empire—that is, in the fourth and fifth centuries A.D.—they note that large villas tend to concentrate in a circular area with urban centers in the middle, towards whose markets the surplus was directed. Diffusion of large villas across a wider area, relative to the urban center, seems to occur, according to their typology, in cases where a very good road system exists. The farther one travels from towns, the more the size of villas diminishes; their production must consequently have been intended mostly for self-consumption, since smaller fundi imply a smaller or nonexistent surplus.

It may be useful to reproduce the classification of villa settlements produced by Cambi, et al., despite the fact that it is not completely

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3 The villas were enlarged in conjunction with the assignment of land to veterans by Octavian in the 40s B.C. and the sites seem to have prospered at least until the end of the first century A.D. See M. Zecchini, “Nella Piana delle Cento Fattorie”, Archeo 188, 2000: 36–47. The area is an archeological park.